

Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1862): A Reconsideration

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IN ISABEL COLEGATE'S novel (also made into a film), *The Shooting Party* (1981), a high-minded Edwardian Englishman, Lionel Stephens, is shown reading a small volume of John Ruskin. We are not told which of Ruskin's works it was, but may surmise *Unto This Last*. Kenneth Clark called it "one of the great prophetic books of the nineteenth century." As a young man, the American historian, Charles A. Beard, carried *Unto This Last* with him everywhere. These testimonials signify that the book has appealed to thoughtful, idealistic people since its initial publication in 1862.

Today Ruskin is separated from us not so much by the ideas contained in the thirty-nine massive volumes of his collected works as by his personality. The one thing about Ruskin which everyone knows is his failed marriage. Many are also aware that he died insane (in 1900, within eight months of another deranged genius, Friedrich Nietzsche). Then there was the unfortunate libel suit after Ruskin called James Abbott McNeill Whistler "a coxcomb who had flung a pot of paint in the public's face." And what about a man whose mother accompanied him when he went to the university? There is also the question of his platonic affection for little girls. One could go on, but it is evident Ruskin was different from the manly, clear-eyed hero of *Tom*

Brown's Schooldays (1857), that novel admired by so many of his contemporaries.

Yet as a critic of art Ruskin has always drawn praise. Kenneth Clark referred to Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) as perhaps the most influential book ever published on the history of taste. This aspect of Ruskin's life continues to receive attention which goes beyond mere respect, as witness the books and monographs that are published about him almost every year.

However, Ruskin's social and economic views were of more importance to him than were his commentaries on art. He called *Unto This Last* "the best [book] I shall ever write." Still in print, *Unto This Last* offers us an opportunity to examine the thought of this man, with a view to making it applicable today.

In 1860-61, concerned about "the call of human misery for help," Ruskin submitted four papers to *Cornhill Magazine*. These papers excoriated the classical political economy of David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill and advocated a new philosophy. *Cornhill's* editor, the novelist W. M. Thackeray, was so upset by the negative public reaction that he refused to print any more of Ruskin's essays. Collected in book form as *Unto This Last* (the title refers to Jesus' words in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, "I will give unto this last even as unto

thee”), the work concentrates on Ruskin’s views about economics and society. How relevant are those views now in the United States?

This question is important because of the present relationship of management and labor and the sluggishness of the American economy. Management focuses upon profits; labor is characterized by low morale that is evident in absenteeism, poor workmanship, and even sabotage. Except in a few industries, American manufacturing suffers from the impact of better and less expensive foreign goods. All too often representatives of business and workers confront each other across a bargaining table like negotiators for two superpowers with implacably hostile views.

Ruskin may provide an answer to ill feeling in the workplace. Contemptuous alike of laissez-faire individualism and socialism, Ruskin in his political economy showed that concern for the wholeness of society which was once characteristic of many conservatives and is still the hallmark of Toryism. Timelessness more than timeliness is the criterion of a great book. *Unto This Last* is both a tract for Ruskin’s time and a program for the present. Its suggestions considered the plight of the underpaid and overworked laborer of the 1860s, and apply as well to today’s more affluent but restless working people. Just as important to Ruskin were the souls of the employers. We know that a hundred more years of economic growth have not brought them ease and contentment.

For Ruskin the richest country was the one that had the most noble and happy human beings. The man who is richest is the one who has perfected his own life and has helped others. This is what Ruskin meant when he wrote that “There is no wealth but life.” Of course, this principle is mocked or ignored today, and so it was when Ruskin wrote these words. That is why Thackeray

stopped publishing Ruskin’s economic and social views at a time when Ruskin was the outstanding critic of art in the English speaking world.

But how did Ruskin believe that an ideal society could be achieved? What would be the respective roles of government, business, and the worker? Ruskin wrote in an age of classical liberalism when laissez-faire doctrine was ascendant; modern America has a mixed economy and a strong union movement. Yet it seems certain that Ruskin would find more social dislocation and lack of harmony now than in his day. Janus-faced, in a benevolent way, Ruskin looked to the future while drawing on the wisdom of the past. His version of the just economy would bring advantages to both capital and labor. But it was the entire picture which concerned him.

Ruskin’s immediate object was to refute the fashionable political economy, which in the name of science put a premium on greed and selfishness. He considered wrong any philosophy which holds that good may arise out of a code that does not consider social affection. Ruskin’s concern for humanity rather than profits echoes the words of an earlier writer, William Cobbett, who said of the political economists, “There is a coldness in their principles and opinions that I hate.... The gain of the thing is all they appear to look at.” Classical political economy was called “liberal” in the nineteenth century, but bears a strong resemblance to today’s economic conservatism.

Tory in that he viewed society as a whole rather than as a collection of individuals, Ruskin stressed the factors which brought people together rather than those that accentuated differences. Yet he also saw through the doctrines of socialism, and stated in *Unto This Last*: “. . . the socialist seeing a strong man oppress a weak one, cries out—‘Break the strong man’s arms’; but I say teach

him to use them to better purpose." Ruskin described himself as "A Tory of the old school," and held that equality is impossible. Thus opposed both to equality and rugged individualism, Ruskin desired an enlightened paternalism on the part of government and industry.

Conditioned by democratic dogmas, today's public considers paternalism old-fashioned and condescending. Egalitarianism is the new doctrine, supported by universal education, mass politics, and powerful doses of government coercion. But as Edmund Burke wrote, those who attempt to level never equalize, and the ineluctable fact of human inequality mocks the social engineers. Ruskin recognized this situation.

Pointing out the generally low esteem in which businessmen were held, Ruskin wrote that the merchant would raise his occupation to those of clergyman, doctor, and soldier if he accepted paternal responsibility. As soldiers must love their officers to fight bravely, workers need a personal relation with their employer in order to do their best. Love is a greater motivating force than money. The ideal master should be unselfish and not calculating in his treatment of workers. Here Ruskin seems to have foreseen that twentieth-century employers who sponsor office parties, company picnics, and sports teams would not achieve desired results in worker morale because their motivation is calculation, not affection—calculation being the belief that contented workers produce more than sullen ones.

This approach represents expediency. But Ruskin wanted justice. This to him was more important than legality. Edmund Burke, in his 1775 "Speech on Conciliation with America," said: "The question with me is not whether you have a right to render your people miserable, but whether it is not your interest to make them happy. It is not what a lawyer tells me I may do, but what hu-

manity, reason, and justice tell me I ought to do." These words to the British Parliament might also represent Ruskin's philosophy of labor relations. As he wrote in *Unto This Last*, "The merchant or manufacturer is invested with a distinctly paternal authority and responsibility." Ignoring *laissez-faire*, the merchant must share the suffering of his employees if business is bad. Ruskin recognized that poor quality work may undersell excellence; the object was to maintain a level of employment and not throw workers on the scrap heap when demand for their work slackened.

This seems to smack of egalitarianism, socialism, and make work. But Ruskin was a moralist, not a socialist. Regarding the current economic system as making people such as himself rich by rendering others poor, he condemned selfishness as the mark of an inferior person. Today, as in his time, the public esteems those who act unselfishly. Listing five necessary professions - military, clergy, physician, lawyer, and merchant - Ruskin points out that the first four are committed to die for society: the soldier who dies in battle; the physician, in times of plague; the pastor, in search of truth; the lawyer, in opposition to injustice. But what is the businessman to die for? Everyone believes that the latter is motivated by profit and lacks heroism. The remedy is fidelity to quality of product and paternal responsibility toward the workers. As the captain of a ship is the last person to leave it in case of a wreck, the businessman must assume responsibility for his company.

This philosophy was matched by Ruskin's political creed. It was the duty of government to provide schools for children to promote health, gentleness, and job training. (Not until 1870 was the first systematic school legislation enacted in Great Britain). The state should also establish workshops for the production and sale of useful articles and

give work or training to the unemployed. The old and destitute should receive "comfort and home," since it was as natural for an elderly worker to receive a pension from his parish as for a man in a higher rank to receive one from the country.

This again sounds socialistic, and the point is reinforced by Ruskin's view that workers are the real source of wealth in society. But with justice in mind, Ruskin was pointing out that society was a reciprocal arrangement: the poor had no right to property of the rich, but neither did the latter have the right to exploit the poor. Robbing the poor is taking advantage of a man's poverty to obtain his labor cheaply. Ruskin correctly saw that the way to defeat socialism is through just treatment of the workers. Four volumes of his letters to working men, collected in book form as *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84), reveal that Ruskin was no socialist and bear a resemblance to open letters which were addressed to the same group during the terrible post-Waterloo era by William Cobbett, another Tory (and one whom Ruskin admired).

Unlike the liberals, Ruskin viewed society as an organism, not as a group of human atoms; unlike the socialists, he realized the necessity for a hierarchy. But the poor are biologically the same as other people and will not be corrupted by kind treatment. To Ruskin man is not an animal limited by his physical wants; the limits are his courage and love, which still have bounds that have not been reached. In a community dominated by laws of supply and demand, people can be thoughtful, sensitive, merciful, just, and godly, yet also they can be poor. Thus virtue and economic justice which should be linked were not.

Ruskin also coined the word "illth"—the opposite of health—for unnecessary or harmful items produced for profit. Quality in all things was his criterion, and he held out hope of "innocent and

exquisite luxury for all." This promise of the future was similar to Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light," and these two earnest Victorians shared a hostility to the crass, go-getting values of what Arnold called the "philistine" middle class. Since Ruskin's time production of "illth" has multiplied, and nowhere more so than in the United States.

At this point one might say that in America class distinctions are based on money and power rather than on birth. Or one might argue that what Ruskin proposed could work in a static, agricultural society but not in a dynamic, industrial one. But Ruskin's England was the world's foremost industrial country, and by the 1860s political power was no longer monopolized by the landed aristocracy. Surely the point is the similarity of work and leisure in Ruskin's lifetime and today. Modern workers are made fairly content by higher wages, but also lack integrated lives and their leisure-time amusements are gross and often destructive of both mind and body.

Ruskin appreciated Carlyle's observation that "Properly speaking all true work is religion." Indeed, for Ruskin work, beauty, and morality were linked. He wanted social conditions in which great art could flourish, for art was a symbol of health in society. Work, when motivated by love, would make a whole of many things. This is not farfetched, for thoughtful people now recognize that in today's society job satisfaction is greatest in occupations which are creative and where the main motivation is not money. Those who are happy with their lives can link work with leisure.

This is apt, for no serious person believes that value is the same as money. Winston Churchill observed that the British people were not animated mainly by hope of material gain. Instead they were stirred by sentiments and instincts. Similarly, Ruskin wanted love and joy as ends in themselves, but also as agents

for a productive society in which nature would be respected and waste eliminated.

This could not be accomplished under socialism or present forms of capitalism but by a morally legitimate hierarchical society. In Ruskin's time and in our own, society is weak not because it is unequal, but because it corrupts moral judgments, favors selfishness, and encourages antisocial behavior. The wise and moral must lead. Ruskin did not want equality but responsible behavior among those who had the welfare of society in their hands.

Some of this is reminiscent of Plato's *Republic*, but without the cynicism and manipulation which characterized the great Athenian's writing on society. Still, we may legitimately ask how Ruskin's reforms are to be accomplished in a democracy, bearing in mind that when *Unto This Last* was written the 1867 Act of Parliament that gave the right to vote to British industrial workers had not been passed and many American states did not allow universal male suffrage. For such results to be achieved a change in human values is necessary.

Like Carlyle, Ruskin was a prophet, and so for that matter was Jesus Christ, whose words provided the title of Ruskin's book. The Victorian was also not a "cool" character. Passionate and stubborn, this great critic of art and society followed his enthusiasms. English values then were basically materialistic. Like modern Americans, the Victorians believed in covering greed with a veil of cant.

In such a situation what chance is there for Ruskin's ideas substantially to influence policy? People with Tory instincts can appreciate Ruskin, but who else? An answer to this question is provided by history. When the first members of the British Labour party took their seats in Parliament at the beginning of this century they agreed that the

most important influence upon them was Ruskin. Clement Attlee, Prime Minister in the socialist government from 1945 to 1951, said the same thing. A socialist prophet, George Bernard Shaw, was also an admirer of *Unto This Last*.

These people were the opposite of Toryism if politics is viewed as a spectrum. But as the evil doctrines of fascism and communism have much in common, while proclaiming hostility to each other, Tories and socialists share certain concerns. Thus Ruskin can appeal to both the political right and the political left, and people of otherwise differing views can agree on his merit. Not many thinkers inspire this type of consensus. Ruskin's thought lives because it appeals to the best in us and makes one want to follow him.

This makes the task of presenting Ruskin as a guide to the present less difficult. Ruskin anticipated the broad outlines of the compassionate state idea which is evident in England and has taken hold in America. The envious, mean-spirited, meddling aspects of the Welfare State may yet be pruned away to reveal Ruskin's generous ideals.

Business is more difficult. It generally produces inferior minds and souls, as well as turning out commodities. For a variety of prudential reasons business has altered some of its positions but is far from enlightened. Despite the recent interest in the MBA degrees, many of the finest young people are reluctant to enter business, and the divorce between Ruskin's world and that of the businessman is as great as it was a hundred years ago. Economic responsibility must develop organically and not be a matter of calculation. Like everything worthwhile it must grow out of a culture. Its roots cannot find nourishment in a restless, acquisitive, profit-seeking environment that does not encourage a philosophic view of the entire society. No radical, Ruskin recognized that capitalistic busi-

ness was probably here to stay, and so may we. Money talks, and while one frequently does not like what it says, the task is to humanize, not destroy it. Ruskin's view is that riches are a form of strength, and strength may benefit everyone.

Ruskin's philosophic view of society must be shared by employers and labor. In this way work becomes central to the quality of life. We have noted that modern workers are pacified by higher wages, but their satisfaction is temporary, leads to greater demands, and does not prevent a desire for early retirement. Successful foreign competition is not entirely due to the new industrial plants of Germany and Japan but to "illth" in the American workplace. Ruskin's recognition that inefficient workers are thrown on the scrap heap is totally relevant today.

Ruskin suggested that in adversity people could agree to limit their hours so that everyone works less but everyone works. This seems utopian, but it is part of his overall philosophy. It is also part of the idea that even those doing menial tasks can perform them with dedication and a sense of pride. All this could be achieved without loss of personal freedom and in the context of a society in which productive enterprise is owned by individuals rather than by the State.

Some would say that Ruskin was unrealistic and question whether his idealism can be practical. But employer paternalism in the form of safety in the workplace was widely achieved even in his day, with and without government regulation. It is also accepted that worker pride in doing a job well is apt to be created by producing high quality goods. Here critics might point out that while there is always a demand for such goods, it is a limited one. Furthermore, labor now shares with management an acquisitive, money-centered attitude. Besides, won't the Ruskin-type employer be forced

out of business by competitors who do not share his philosophy?

Ruskin would answer that in a paternalistic environment productivity would increase so that the business would remain competitive. But of course if this destroys cooperation between management and labor, leading to greater claims by each at the expense of the other, no good will have been achieved and we will be back at the beginning. Ruskin knew about Victorian techniques of exploitation of labor by employers, but he died before corrupt unions and "featherbedding" developed. Yet he was aware of labor violence and sabotage at the work place. More money for less work—the cry of the unionist throughout the ages—was not unknown to this man.

This brings us to the central part of Ruskin's views: his integrated Toryism. His art criticism argued that art was a moral instrument, but so was work. Both art and work should be motivated by love rather than by money or calculation. To Ruskin life was not survival in a jungle but a community of affection and caring: moral as well as physical well-being. The cause of man's misery was not inequality but his work. Ruskin had a scale of values in which some things were more important than others, but he strove for a whole society.

Despite the differences between persons Ruskin believed that mutual respect was possible, and in the economic area it was essential. Responsibility, not equality, was his goal and his method was to stir people's enthusiasms and generous feelings. While equality was impossible and efforts to achieve it were unwise, men may still cooperate, find satisfaction in work, and lead whole rather than fragmented lives. The workplace could be a cathedral, not a prison.

In Thomas Wolfe's 1935 novel, *Of Time and the River*, an earnest woman physician who had been reading Ruskin speaks of his "Lofty and ennobling sentiments,"

and the "sane and wholesome beauty" of his philosophy. Wolfe was poking fun at a certain type of educated female that was probably more evident fifty years ago than now. But Ruskin occasionally invites ridicule of anything that smacks of moral uplift. To a considerable degree this is a measure of the distance in outlook between ourselves and the Victorians.

These Victorians produced the Christian Socialist movement, but Ruskin's belief in hierarchy and suspicion of levelling led him to avoid this scheme. Ruskin's Toryism also demanded that he be consistent and in his own domestic economy not discharge aged or redundant servants. Despite excesses of rhetoric, Ruskin's social criticism matches his philosophy of art in that both are works which convey a vision of an ideal world.

Such efforts are liable to mockery of the type in Wolfe's novel, or scathing criticism as in George Orwell's description of fruit-juice-drinking, sandal-wearing nudists, who were followers of Shaw's version of socialism. This is a result of being a prophet. Ruskin's situation was not helped by his holding views untypical for his generally materialistic times.

Yet his emphasis upon quality products, his insistence that businessmen share the economic fortunes of their workers, and his recognition that through their labor all people have earned the right to a secure old age are significant now more than ever. While Ruskin's immediate purpose in writing *Unto This Last* was to argue against contemporary economic individualism, he also provided a social philosophy that is timeless.